28 October 2010 Last updated at 10:03 GMT

'Haitch' or 'aitch'? How do you pronounce 'H'?

By David Sillito BBC arts correspondent

David Sillito tests the changing sound of English pronunciation

The pronunciation of common words has changed drastically over time. So, as the British Library begins a quest to record people's articulations, what do the differences in how we pronounce words say about us?

Pedants, beware. The sound of *says*, *ate*, *mischievous*, *harass*, *garage*, *schedule* and *aitch* is shifting.

Once upon a time, there were gales of laughter when Frank Spencer in Some Mothers Do 'Ave 'Em pronounced *harass* with the emphasis on the second syllable.

Now, according to the British Library, evidence suggests that for people under the age of 35, it is becoming the favoured pronunciation.

Indeed the younger you are, the more likely you are to make *says* rhyme with *lays* rather than *fez*, *ate* rhyme with *late* rather than *bet* and to add a whole new syllable to *mischievous*, turning it in to miss-CHEEVY-us rather than MISS-chiv-us.

Aitch vs Haitch

British English dictionaries give *aytch* as the standard pronunciation for the letter H. However, the pronunciation *haytch* is also attested as a legitimate variant. We also do not ask broadcasters who naturally say *haytch* to change their pronunciation but if a broadcaster contacted to ask us, we would tell them that *aytch* is regarded as the standard pronunciation in British English, people can feel very strongly about this and this pronunciation is less likely to attract audience complaints.

Haytch is a standard pronunciation in Irish English and is increasingly being used by native English-speaking people all across the country, irrespective of geographical provenance or social standing. Polls have shown that the uptake of *haytch* by younger native speakers is on the rise. Schoolchildren repeatedly being told not to drop Hs may cause them to hyper-correct and insert them where they don't exist.

The British Library now wants to get a clearer idea of how spoken English is changing by recording as many people as possible reading the opening paragraph of the Mr Men book, Mr Tickle.

The library's socio-linguist Jonnie Robinson picked the passage because it's well known, easy to read and will probably be read with as "normal a voice as possible". He does not want people to put on a "posh" speaking voice.

It's part of the library's forthcoming Evolving English exhibition and aims to show how pronunciation is not a matter of right and wrong but merely fashion.

One exhibit is the BBC's guide to pronunciation from 1928. In it, it informs announcers that *pristine* rhymes with *wine*, *respite* is pronounced as if there were no *e*, *combat* is *cumbat*, *finance* was *finn-ance*. Even then some of the suggestions were becoming archaic. Not only is *housewifery* no longer pronounced *huzzifry*, it is almost entirely obsolete as a word.

Quite why some words change is unknown. Because, while many are importations from America - *schedule* turning into *skedul*e is almost certainly a consequence of American films and television - the gradual shift of *garage* to sound like *garridge* is less easy to explain.

So too is there a mystery as to why certain pronunciations cause such strong feeling. Take the eighth letter of the alphabet, pronounce it *haitch* and then look for the slightly agonised look in some people's eyes.

One suggestion is that it touches on a long anxiety in English over the letter *aitch*. In the 19th Century, it was normal to pronounce *hospital*, *hotel* and *herb* without the *h*. Nowadays "aitch anxiety" has led to all of them acquiring a new sound, a beautifully articulated *aitch* at the beginning. America has perhaps hung on to its aitchless *herb* because it has less class anxiety attached to pronunciations.

Generational divide

Language change happens through innovation - each generation talks slightly differently from the one before. So we hear a "pronunciation divide" between the young and the old with forms like aitch and haitch. Children's first exposure to English is usually through their parents, but once at school, the words and pronunciations they adopt are more influenced by other children they spend all day with. It's a human thing to adapt to the group in this way. We also gradually change borrowed words, like *village* and *garage* from French, to fit a more English pronunciation - with an *-idge* sound in the last syllable. *Village* is much further along in this ongoing process and therefore less controversial. Languages have always been alive and evolving to suit the users' communication needs, and it's not a bad thing to have change like this.

Jon Herring, British Library

However, the link between class, voice and status is not what it once was. Many of us are barely aware of how we say *says* or *ate* or what was once considered the right and proper way.

It marks a decline in class anxiety in speech; attitudes to accents and pronunciations have become much more relaxed.

However, there are some pronunciations that do inspire ridicule and prejudice. If you rhyme *cloth*, *wrath* and *off* with *north* and *wharf* then you are in a small and declining tribe.

The shift from the "received pronunciation" of the 1930s and 40s is well documented but one example of how far it has fallen out of favour is that in the forthcoming BBC costume drama, South Riding, the

Yorkshire accents of the 1930s pass without comment but the voices that would have been classic "RP" in the book have been updated.

Audiences, it is argued, simply could not sit through a drama and care about a character if they sounded that "posh". They would be too busy laughing.

Below is a selection of your comments

I have to say that whilst I acknowledge that language and therefore pronunciation is constantly evolving I do get irritated when people "invent" a new syllable in a word, as in your example of "mischievous". All too often, people simply don't read the word as it is written, preferring to vocalise what they think they see rather than what is actually written down. It is almost as if some people are not aware that the pronunciation of a word is based upon the letters which make it up. Pure laziness I call it!

Eamonn Hennessy, Kendal, UK

Most alterations to the English don't really bother me, as they are simply the evolution of a living language. However, hearing the incorrect pronunciation of the letter H really does annoy me. It also gives me the impression that the person uttering it is a complete twerp. An obviously personal view, you understand. I notice that certain BBC presenters are now using the "haytch". If it ever reaches the national BBC News then I'm sure it'll certainly be the death of the correct "aytch" pronunciation.

Andy, Southampton

This is all fine and dandy, but does anyone seriously refer to the National Health Service as the 'En-Haitch-Ess'??

Matt, Newmarket

As a 65 year old Yorkshireman I have a fairly strong Yorkshire accent, but also have had a good education and acquired a good command of the English language. When saying the letter H alone it should paradoxically be Aitch, but the rest of the time in 99% of cases it should be pronounced. I visibly cringe when newsreaders say an 'ospital, 'orse, 'otel, 'istoric, 'orrendous etc. Its not hard to say "a hotel". Regarding other words, I have always said "Garridge" and "Skedule". Skedule has always been the correct pronunciation according to the Oxford dictionary, along with scheme, schism, school and many more. Only words of Germanic origin pronounce it "Sh".

Peter Northrop, Wakefield

The way you pronounced H was used by kids playing at sectarianism, in 1950s Luton where my Irish Dad spent most of his childhood. Native English speakers would say "aitch" and be assumed to be Protestant, whereas those of Irish decent would say "haitch" and be assumed to be Catholic. This self-consciousness meant my Dad quickly lost his Irish accent and to this day speaks with a broad Bedfordshire lilt. On the other hand my Mum never had any hang-ups about her accent and skips between broad Bury and broad Dundonian. Incidentally, as a Scot, she uses neither pronunciation of H, she says "itch". Perhaps that's why my Dad married her!

Flora, Shipley

The article mentions the move from garage to garridge, but I'm now 25 and as long as I can remember, anyone pronouncing it in the original way would be ridiculed as using an American pronunciation! maybe this is indicative of my social class! Rah-thur! I say! Eh what?!

Antonion, London

The one that gets me is 'th' becoming 'ff' as in the word 'nothing' becoming 'nuffink'. Sentences like "I ain't done nuffink!" that litter the dialogue of a certain London-based BBC soap opera influence the speech of people far beyond the M25.

Rod, Edinburgh

What a letter sounds like and what it is called don't have to match ('doubleyoo' as opposed to 'wuh' is a good example). So calling H aitch is not a problem. I was brought up to use aitch and that haitch was only used by ignorant people. A certain amount of snobbery there. If haitch is a local variant or otherwise accepted (I would use the OED as my guide there) I am happy to change my view of it. But I will never, I hope, change my view of sloppy or lazy pronunciation. Especially when it leads young people to write 'could of' when they mean 'could have'. And while language does develop and evolve, some uses are simply incorrect and probably always will be. In speaking as much as writing, clarity is all.

Sandy Fox, Derby

http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-11642588